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ABSTRACT

The Women's Place is a community adult education program to provide a creative environment in which knowledge, skills, and feelings can be shared in an ambiance in which meaningful relationships can develop. Its antecedent was a women's support group formed in the summer of 1978. In 1979 the YWCA was chosen as sponsor of this on-going monthly program. As the means to implement the program's aims, a unique panel method has been developed. A keynote speaker is followed by a discussion by guest panelists and then a question and answer period. The audience then is divided into small sections to which the keynote speaker assigns tasks stimulating exploration of the evening's topic. Data collected from January 1979 through July 1980 from 226 women indicated the typical Women's Place member is a comfortable middle class woman who reports highly intense dissatisfaction with herself, job, and marriage. Although afraid of change, she feels an inner pressure to do so. Data indicate success of the model is applicable to other adult education settings and contain a wide variety of topics. The model illustrates need for such programs and the fact that adult educators and community agencies are in a position to meet this need. (YLB)

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CREATING: A PLACE FOR WOMEN*

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INTRODUCTION

Embarking on a new project was immediately challenging and exciting. For months we had nurtured an idea which we believed constituted a sound premise for a community adult education program -- a program which could be mutually enriching for audience, educator, and agency. This program, novel as it is, does not propose to replace current value systems. Rather, it seeks to supplement them by injecting stimulating procedures for motivation and personal reinforcement and by structuring a free cohesive curriculum within a creative, instructive, and benevolent environment. The Minneapolis Urban YWCA has given us an official "home base" from which to launch our model program, and we thank them for that privilege.

Before we describe this model, let us introduce ourselves.

One author is, primarily, a professor working with non-traditional students in the General College at the University of Minnesota.

The other author is a marriage and family therapist in private practice in the Twin Cities, and a faculty member at the Alfred Adler Institute.

Both authors have considerable experience teaching in traditional extension classrooms.

However, from its earliest inception, both authors conceived the Women's Place as designed to be different from the usual classroom setting, i.e., no "teachers," "students," "formal classrooms," "tests," "college credits," or "registration." Instead, it was to be an alternative model to provide for, what we believe, is an unmet need in the community.

Its aim is to provide a creative environment in which knowledge, skills, and feelings can be shared in an ambiance wherein meaningful relationships can develop. The Women's Place provides fertile ground for intellectual, social, and emotional growth as well as a supportive network in which the human values of loving, helping, and sharing will prevail.

WHAT IS THE WOMEN'S PLACE?

In brief, it is a program in which the traditional roles of teacher, student, and agency can blend and become practically indistinguishable. We dared to hope for an equalitarian model where women could meet, be supportive of one another, learn from one another, encourage one another, and demonstrate that lifelong learning and sharing can be joyous as well as educational.

HOW THE PROGRAM GOT STARTED AND ITS CURRENT STATUS

In the summer of 1978 a small group of women, who knew each other socially and/or professionally, formed a women's support group. Although several of the nine original members were professional therapists, it was clearly understood from the beginning that there was to be no formal "facilitator" in the group, that the duties of the traditional "facilitator" were to be shared by all.

The authors of this paper were active participants in that original unit. They experienced the impact of that group on their own personal growth and awareness. The excitement, the dynamic exchange of feelings freely expressed, the unusual closeness and nurturing relationships dominating the group demonstrated an imperative requirement for continuing and expanding this unique pilot program. It was the inspiration which led to the concept of the Women's Place, its method and format.

We conceived the project to be housed in a facility which would be open to all women in the Twin City area -- especially those looking for support, increased knowledge, and awareness of their everchanging roles -- a place where interested women could meet regularly on a monthly basis. From the project's inception, we developed a research plan which contained the basis for studying the evolution and impact of the Women's Place.

After piloting the program on our own and with the support of other concerned women, we chose the YWCA to sponsor and help us expand the Women's Place in 1979. The Women's Place and the YWCA's goals complement and enhance one another. We have continued to work together, happily and fruitfully, to meet the needs of our joint members. While membership in the YWCA is not required, members are entitled to a reduced Women's Place fee. The Women's Place is currently structured as an on-going monthly program requiring no formal time commitment beyond the initial evening attended.

THE FORMAT SERVING THE WOMEN'S PLACE AUDIENCE

A unique panel method, involving the use of a keynote speaker, guest panelists and audience participation, was developed by the authors to implement the aims of the Women's Place, i.e., each speaker is asked to help secure a panel of four or five women who complement the main speaker's topic and share personal experiences with the audience. The keynote speaker is introduced by a Women's Place member who has volunteered for the duty. Forty-five minutes is alloted to the main speaker after which each panelist comments for five or ten minutes.

A brief question and answer period follows. The audience is then divided into small sections and a task, designated by the keynote speaker, is assigned to each group. This task stimulates everyone to explore more fully the evening's topic. Some time is saved before the meeting is adjourned in order to process the small group discussions. To enhance the informal nature of the setting, refreshments are provided as part of the program and are offered prior to the meeting of the small groups.

The panel format facilitates learning as well as sharing. The speaker provides the information in condensed mini-lecture style. Panel members then share their personal experiences and insights. Thus, the panel and

guest speakers simultaneously provide information and skills while serving as role models and catalytic agents.

The audience is encouraged verbally and by role modeling to share its knowledge and to implement the new awarenesses and feelings evoked in a relatively free and happy atmosphere. The small group experiences help participants personalize the knowledge gained by their involvement. They are encouraged to utilize their new found communication skills, to share feelings, to make new friends, and to relate to other women in an open and supportive atmosphere.

EXAMPLE OF A TYPICAL WOMEN'S PLACE PROGRAM

Elaboration of the first Women's Place Program held in December, 1978 will illustrate the basic innovative concepts outlined above.

The keynote speaker for the initial program was the Reverend Jeanette Picard. Reverend Picard is a Minnesota resident and one of the first female Episcopalian ministers in the world. Her husband, the late Dr. Auguste Picard, was the famous balloonist and physicist. Reverend Picard was 83 in 1978. Her topic was the "Changing Woman." Panelists that evening, selected by Reverend Picard and the authors, included the following:

1. Reverend Picard's granddaughter: age 29, married, pregnant with her first child, in the process of changing from a full-time social work career to a part-time career in the mental health field.
2. Young mother: age 33, married, 3 children, full-time home-maker, former public school teacher.
3. Single woman: age 28, full-time career as a marriage and family counselor.
4. Married woman: age 35, full-time career as a university professor, pioneering in research on the childfree lifestyle, stepmother to two children.

5. Married woman: age 27, full-time career as a social worker, expecting her second child.
6. Single parent: divorced, age 38, two children, full-time career as a dance instructor.

These panelists represented a wide spectrum of the change process encountered by many contemporary women. By sharing themselves with the audience, the panelists gave those present the feeling of belonging, of hope, and of understanding. What happened that evening was the exciting discovery that they were not alone in going through a social change. This new awareness made it easier for the women to relate to their own lives many of the ideas and emotions the speakers were expressing.

Indeed, preliminary analysis of the data indicates that both panel and audience benefit from this format: the panel members report responding positively to the audience, feeling rewarded for their contribution, and accepted for sharing a very intimate part of themselves. The audience indicated that the panelists were doing something very worthwhile, that the sharing of feelings, the risk-taking, can facilitate personal growth in the supportive atmosphere provided by the Women's Place.

WHO ARE WOMEN'S PLACE MEMBERS?

From January 1979 through July 1980, data was collected from 226 women by an anonymous pencil-and-paper questionnaire administered at the beginning of the monthly meetings of the Women's Place. The questionnaire contained both open-ended and forced-choice items. Preliminary analysis demonstrates that the women sampled are extremely competent, highly educated, middle class, caucasian, dynamic, and changing persons. A "composite model" highlighting some of the socio-economic status variables produced the following picture of a typical Women's Place member:

While the average age is 36, members range from 20 through 63, with clustering mainly in the 25-39 and 43-50 brackets.

Marital status is highly variable with women reporting married, divorced, single, separated, or widowed as their current status.

Typically, these women have two children. The second most reported number of children is "none," perhaps heralding a new lifestyle for the 1980s.

The average length of marriage is 13 years. The second most common marital status is single.

Respondents indicate they do not think of themselves as full-time "homemakers."

A majority have college degrees. A full range of educational levels from high school through graduate and trade schools is also represented.

Typical jobs fall into the area commonly described by the United States Census Bureau as "professional and kindred workers." This includes executive secretaries, nurses, accountants, office managers, etc. There is also a heavy percentage with special crafts type skills, e.g., artists and tailors. Typically these women work full-time, with a surprisingly high percentage working more than 40 hours per week.

Income for this highly motivated group averages $10,000 to $15,000 for a single income. Those indicating joint income are usually in the $25,000 range. A third of the sampled group reports joint incomes of $40,000 or more.

In addition to the demographic information, the typical respondent describes herself as "having self doubts about the ability to change," "feeling anxious," and "having some fear of risk-taking." "Belief in oneself," followed by "support from female friend," is reported as the greatest source of strength. Of the 115 married women sampled, only 52 indicate

their husbands as supportive of the changing nature of their lives. "Spouse" is also given as the largest single source of "hassles." These women indicate that they are their own best friend and source of strength -- they are also their own biggest critic! What such a woman, if married, doesn't berate herself about, her spouse will. Where the husband desists, the typical married respondent reports that some "female family member" will take up the destructive "put-down" pattern about the change process currently in effect.

In this analysis the typical respondent appears -- on the surface -- to be a comfortable middle class person. Internally, however, such women reported highly intense dissatisfaction with themselves. They indicated feelings of being overqualified and underpaid in their jobs, and not finding satisfaction in their marriages. These are the women who indicate they are afraid to take risks. They chide themselves for not being good enough -- for not making the mark. Although afraid of change, they feel an inner pressure to do so, and are buoyed up and encouraged by the women's movement. They indicate there is hope for a richer, better life. They look to other women and women's groups to help them in their troubled striving for a more rewarding and purposeful existence.

Although afraid of change, they describe themselves as women who have gone through all kinds of change in the last five years -- changes in marital status, jobs, roles, lifestyle values, and personal values. While they feel encouraged about the possibility of change, there is real fear of what change will bring. As one woman stated it: "I'm not sure that it would be all right or that others would like it."

Not surprising in these days of high divorce rates, many of the married women report finding little satisfaction in their marriages and seek to find fulfillment elsewhere. These women are searching. They

want more out of life. They are not saying that marriage per se is bad or not valued, but they are discovering that they do not find total or even partial satisfaction in marriage. Many indicate they are searching for fulfillment through their work -- just as men traditionally have done. While some single women expressed an interest in marrying, this was not reported as an overriding concern. As one woman wrote on her questionnaire, "I often wonder what life would have been like if I had married, but I don't regret it. My life has been pretty full so far.

APPLICATION OF THE WOMEN'S PLACE PROJECT FOR A GENERAL ADULT EDUCATION MODEL

A number of challenging conclusions emerge from this project. These may be of value to other adult educators and community agencies facing the task of serving a contemporary population of women interested in a non-academic innovative experience of women searching for a new identity.

First and primarily the data indicates clearly that the Women's Place attracted highly educated, changing and introspective women willing to pay a small fee to attend a program exploring issues of change. The success of the Women's Place in attracting these women demonstrates that there is a real and urgent need for community agencies to provide place and programs for women to discuss their change process in a supportive atmosphere.

The authors found that a monthly two and a half hour program has worked well. Other scheduling modules in terms of length of time and number of meetings could be explored depending on an agency's needs and staff. The fact that there is no long-term registration commitment or need for an escort is also a significant "plus" in attracting an audience.

Second, the authors believe that the success of their Women's Place model can be adapted readily to a variety of groups. The model format has already been used by one of the authors for new programs instituted at

the YWCA entitled "The Couples' Group" and "The Single's Club." Untested as yet is whether a men's group, based on this format, would find an equally responsive audience. Other potential group organizations are "The Parent's Place" and "The Young Adult's Place."

Third, the Women's Place model appears to have fulfilled its potential as a valued and innovative program providing a rewarding experience for audience, speakers, panelists, and agency alike.

In these days, when the issue of "burn out" is of major concern to all, the Women's Place format provides a setting in which everyone can benefit -- in which the facilitator can "get as much as she gives." (The authors can attest personally to the rejuvenating effect that involvement in this project has had on their initial enthusiasm for leading small groups in general, and working with women in particular.) We believe that it is the supportive and equalitarian nature of the Women's Place format which allows the facilitators to share and enjoy the group dynamics while still incorporating a leadership role that is both exhilarating and refreshing. The group facilitator is ultimately responsible for the program; yet, she too is a Women's Place member.

Fourth, other community adult education agencies may want to adapt this format to give their own staff more quality "people contact time" by providing an opportunity to work with clients in a supportive, mutually enhancing, stimulating, and meaningful small group atmosphere.

Fifth, the use of a volunteer staff enhances the Women's Place format. It increases public contact with the YWCA and provides essential services at practically no cost. Inviting volunteers to fill such roles as guest panelist, liaison with the YWCA, and serving as board members on the program planning committee gives volunteers an opportunity to increase their speaking skills, gain self-esteem, meet new people, and make an original contribution

through this new approach. Furthermore, the use of volunteers is consistent with the project's emphasis on making the Women's Place a shared endeavor between audience, educator, and agency.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The authors have described a unique workshop model designed to bring the needs of audience, educator, and agency into a harmonious system of shared responsibility, group support, and meaningful experimental programming. The data indicates that the success of the Women's Place model is applicable to other adult education settings and can contain a wide variety of topics. In sum, the Women's Place model illustrates the need for such programs and that adult educators and community agencies are in a unique position to meet this challenging need. It requires only a new approach to the role of Today's Woman.